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CPYRGHT

*A C.I.A. Feeler
On Vietnam*

CPYRGHT

It would be interesting to know whether last weekend's leak of a Central Intelligence Agency paper on Vietnam was a security break, or a deliberate back-door publication. Whichever it was the paper, suggesting the possibility of "some kind of negotiated settlement based on neutralization" in South Vietnam, has an air of gloomy realism about it not usual in more official pronouncements. For somehow the brave words from Washington and Saigon are never translated into events on the spot.

The Administration says that this paper does not reflect official policy. But it bears the imprimatur of "general Board approval" in the C.I.A. It is identified as the work of Williard Matthias, a member of the agency's top-level Board of National Estimates. And it makes discouraging reading. For it records "serious doubt that victory can be won," so that a "prolonged stalemate" is the most we can achieve. Meanwhile the counter-guerrilla drive into which we are pouring our money and our hearts — and the lives of ever more young Americans — "continues to flounder."

Dispiriting as all this is, it does check with the record. No doubt nothing will be done about it until after the election, because if either side should now recommend negotiation the other would call it chicken. Already Senator Goldwater, in his speech to the V.F.W. in Cleveland yesterday, charged that the Johnson Administration was headed for a negotiated peace.

No doubt he is right. The troubling question

is, what other way out is there? It is easy to bring the crowd up cheering by demanding an end to it all through victory. It is less easy to explain how victory is to be won in those far-off rice paddies, jungles, and mountains. We know from Korea (and still more from what we ourselves would do were the situation reversed) that any armed advance north by our own forces would bring in Red China.

Suppose, though, that we risked all-out land war on that distant shore none the less. Suppose we risked the escalation into nuclear incineration it might unintentionally trigger. Suppose we risked the most likely side-effect of all, namely that Russia would take over Europe while all our strength was engaged in Asia. But suppose that despite all this we finally did win. Then what? Would we occupy Southeast Asia and parts of China, and govern them? If we ever withdrew, who would govern? Saigon, which has had three governments in a year, none of them able to govern? Or a Red China, maybe, risen from the ashes like Japan and Germany after World War II?

At the moment General Khanh is having fresh troubles. And no wonder, for as the Matthias paper says, the war in Vietnam "is really more of a political contest than a military operation." It is not to be won by military means alone. Make no mistake about it, a negotiated truce, even now that we have shown we mean business, might indeed risk an eventual takeover by Red China. But in the end Mao might find these people just as hard to subjugate permanently as Mr. Khrushchev has found the satellites that are straining at his own leash. And such a strain on Peking wouldn't cost a single American life.